HIST510

Was the use of strategic bombing militarily justifiable?

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The rise of the aeroplane changed warfare forever. With aeroplanes, it was now possible to attack an enemy behind the front lines, disrupting supply lines and even the production of war essentials occurring hundreds of miles behind the battlefield. While attacking equipment and ammunition factories, oil refineries and transport hubs makes good military sense, it comes with the ethical consideration of the civilian lives that are taken. The question arises whether a worker in a munitions factory is a de facto participant in the war. Is it fair that civilians who live and work near a ‘strategic’ target are merely ‘collateral damage’? Should civilians be made to “feel the weight of war”?[[1]](#footnote-1) And finally, if killing a number of enemy civilians (if that is not an oxymoron) will bring to a halt the rise of an evil regime and end the war sooner thereby saving lives, is this justified? The question of the Allied strategic bombing needs to be judged according to the reasons and context of its implementation, its effectiveness as a military strategy, and from an ethical perspective with consideration of ‘what is a civilian’.

It is imperative on the historian to judge the legitimacy of an action based on what came before the decision rather than what has developed since. It is important, then, to understand the brief history and theory of air forces since their inception during World War I until the outbreak of World War II. Despite the very limited use of the then Independent Air Force, its ability in attacking beyond the frontline of an enemy quickly became its accepted role. If strategy in 1918 was to disrupt the transport supply of the frontline, as aeroplane technology developed so did the acceptance of bombing further behind the enemy lines. Sir Hugh Trenchard, the ‘father’ of the RAF established this blueprint for the heavy bombernear the end of WWI:

“There are two factors, moral and material effect … The best means to this end is to attack the industrial centres where you (a) Do military and vital damage by striking at the centres of war material; (b) Achieve the maximum effect on the morale by striking at the most sensitive part of the German population – namely the working class.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

Later, Keegan goes on to outline the “class bias” inherent in this judgment. Where other writers wrote of the national hubris that the German civilian would capitulate where the Blitz had only more sternly determined the British, I had wondered whether this idea had its roots in the Russian Revolution. Keegan expounds this theory, drawing on Liddell Hart’s 1925 prediction that bombing raids would “[madden] slum districts … into the impulse to break loose and maraud” like their proletariat comrades in Russia during WWI.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Brought up on Hollywood heroes and CNN’s coverage of US “precision bombing” in Iraq and Afghanistan, and even the performance of the RAF in support of Operation Overlord in June 1944[[4]](#footnote-4), it is easy to forget that in September 1940 Churchill called the RAF a “ramshackle air freight service exporting bombs to Germany”.[[5]](#footnote-5) Keegan lists a litany of areas where RAF bombers struggled to accurately or adequately bomb German targets: they lacked speed, range, height and power; they had to fly over occupied and increasingly hostile France, Belgium or Holland; and finally and most importantly, they had no way of accurately delivering their payloads at night. Not only did they miss their strategic targets, but frequently the entire city. The Butt Report of August 1941 reported that of all the planes that actually dropped bombs over the industrial Ruhr, the primary target area, only one in ten got within five miles of its target. So hopeless was the scenario facing bomber crews that the RAF lost more aircrew in 1941 than it killed German civilians.[[6]](#footnote-6)

It is not surprising, then, that faced with terrible losses and inefficiencies and with British towns having received far more damage from the Luftwaffe than the RAF imparted, the Air Staff made the decision to enact area bombing in February 1942. Mark Connelly is unapologetic in declaring his bias in his history of Bomber Command by reasserting the context of the time to explain the actions of the Royal Air Force Bomber Command during World War II.[[7]](#footnote-7) For Connelly, the decision to implement area bombing under Harris is not only understandable, but a last throw of the dice. Nazi Germany controlled most of Europe and the British Army had fled back to England, abandoning French, Belgian and Luxembourg forces. The Soviet Union had been invaded. Pearl Harbor had been bombed, destroying much of the US Pacific Fleet. Malaya had been overrun in two months and ‘Fortress’ Singapore had just fallen. Across the globe, Germany and Japan held the upper hand. No one knew in February 1942 that the Japanese expansion could be stopped, that the Germany invasion of the USSR was a massive mistake or that Britain would emerge victorious after having its army stuck in England for four years.[[8]](#footnote-8) Downes suggests that desperation to win and save lives by avoiding a war of attrition trumps humanity in the decision to attack civilian populations, even in democracies where in hypothetical surveys this idea is abhorrent.[[9]](#footnote-9) But the bombing of London allowed the British to “disregard the haziness of international law on the topic of aerial warfare and retaliate.”[[10]](#footnote-10) Yet even before these seemingly hopeless days, Churchill wrote in July 1941 that “one thing [that would defeat Hitler] is an absolutely devastating exterminating attack by very heavy bombers … upon the Nazi homeland.”[[11]](#footnote-11) The Air Staff made this clear to Bomber Command: “[operations] should now be focused on the morale of the enemy civilian population and in particular of industrial workers.”[[12]](#footnote-12) Obviously concerned that this could be interpreted as ‘bomb the factories’, Air Chief Marshal Sir Charles Portal clarified it the following day: “I suppose it is clear that the new aiming points are to be the built-up areas, not, for instance, the dockyards or aircraft factories.”[[13]](#footnote-13)

In addition to the stated objective of area bombing cities to lower German morale, the reporting of the bombings were used to bolster British morale. Having survived the Blitz from September 1940 to May 1941, there was more than a touch of ‘they started it’ from the British population when news of the first German towns to be bombed, Lübeck and Rostock, was made public in late April 1942. The *Daily Express* newspaper described photographs of the British raid on Lübeck as what happened “when the RAF decided to render an English translation of the word ‘blitz.’”[[14]](#footnote-14) The *Daily Mirror* triumphantly proclaimed “We Smash Their Towns One By One.”[[15]](#footnote-15) It was also used to claim the high moral ground as evidenced by Herbert Morrison, Minister of Home Security, in a speech to the House of Commons a few days later where he suggested that while the Nazis “openly boasted” of the bombing of British towns, this had not been replicated in the United Kingdom.[[16]](#footnote-16) Instead, “the foul canker of Nazism must be cut out, and until it is the body of the German nation will suffer … If they cannot or will not [defeat the Nazis], we will.”[[17]](#footnote-17)

From a military strategy point of view, and of the ethical thinking of the USAAF versus the RAF, the Casablanca conference in January 1943 is instructive. While the official report outlined a ‘combined bomber offensive’ (Operation Pointblank) at a prioritised list of targets, it covered up a fundamental disagreement between the USAAF and the RAF. General Eaker (USAAF Eighth Air Force) refused to participate in night‑time area bombing, maintaining the USAAF was better used at hitting specific industrial targets in daylight.[[18]](#footnote-18) This was partly based on the USAAF faith in the ability of the self-defending Flying Fortresses. In their first sortie under Pointblank, however, the USAAF lost sixteen percent of its planes, three times the RAF’s acceptable attrition rate, in its attack on a ball bearing plant at Schweinfurt. This effectively grounded the USAAF’s daytime raids until the advent of long-range fighter support planes. This was a time of great success for Harris and the RAF Bomber Command, however. 18,000 sorties by 800 planes dropped 58,000 tons of bombs on German towns and cities. Of special interest was the firestorm which destroyed Hamburg in late July 1943, along with more precise operations: the ‘dam busters’ mission in May and on a missile workshop in August.[[19]](#footnote-19)

A second reason why the USAAF preferred to take the role of precision bomber is that it felt the American people, and for political survival reasons therefore, Congress, did not have “the stomach” for the bombing of German civilians.[[20]](#footnote-20) It had no such qualms, however, in learning from the RAF in how to conduct area bombing raids, particularly the science of incendiary bombing, and utilising this knowledge against the more conducive wood-built Japanese cities. Might it be that each Allied country felt a twinge of moral conscience at the actions of its comrade against the enemy which had first bombed it, but no such compunction when providing the “whirlwind”[[21]](#footnote-21) against its own more personal enemy who had attacked them first? We have seen the glee which British newspapers published news of Lübeck and Rostock. Similarly, the raids on Japan were accepted and celebrated in the United States as payback for Pearl Harbor. Thirdly, and possibly now seen as a minimal reason, but surely at the time was a very real factor, was the position of the United States *Army* Air Force as merely one branch of the Army and not a fully separate branch in its own right. USAAF chiefs were very aware that they needed to be free from any perceived need of oversight if they were to become a separate force.[[22]](#footnote-22)

As to the effectiveness of Allied strategic bombing, many commentators question whether it had any effect. Werrell suggested it “neither broke German morale nor deprived the German military of needed weapons”[[23]](#footnote-23) and the United States Strategic Bombing Survey concluded that the most damaged cities’ morale were stiffened, “proving the least willing to surrender.”[[24]](#footnote-24) Despite the bombing of factories which halted output from those facilities, overall German industrial output increased and peaked in 1944, much of which was consumer goods rather than materiel.[[25]](#footnote-25) Indeed, it only took between one and five months for bombed cities to return to 80 percent capacity.[[26]](#footnote-26) Keegan takes the middle ground, declaring that it is impossible to prove whether strategic bombing was the decisive factor as the “peak of the bombers’ success” came at the same time as the defeat of the German Army and Allied occupation of German territory, although he does suggest that while a similar bombing campaign did dampen Japanese morale, German morale was “never broken” by bombers.[[27]](#footnote-27) Moeller similarly recognises that it did not have the desired effect on morale, but the money and manpower expended on repair, defence and treatment of casualties used resources that could not be expended on the war effort.[[28]](#footnote-28)

Even in war, the international community recognises the ethical dilemma of ‘unjust means being used for a just end’[[29]](#footnote-29) and that there is a need for rules of engagement. Much of the current understanding, however, comes from post-World War II conferences and documents to ensure the excesses of WWII barbarity is never repeated. Even at the time there was discussion and concern at the ethical path that was being trodden. The concept of ‘total war’ gave some semblance of justification to the bombing of civilian towns, as did the Germans by initiating the practice. But even if labeled and practiced, is ‘total war’ an ethically acceptable concept, what is an ‘innocent’ or ‘civilian’ and how absolute a moral value should be placed on their protection? Moeller suggests that the experience of supplying the stalemated army in World War I saw the recognition that the “mobilization of the industrial army at home was vitally linked to the army in uniform at the front.”[[30]](#footnote-30)

The place of the civilian population changed between the drafting of The Hague Convention in 1907 and the post-WWII United Nations Genocide Convention, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Fourth Geneva Convention. At The Hague, belligerents were limited to soldiers and civilians were prohibited from fighting, even in resistance to occupation. By the time of the post-war conventions of the late 1940s, the motive was to protect civilians from the worst excesses of the Axis occupying forces, protecting civilian human rights and livelihoods. It recognized that notwithstanding our wartime designation of ally or enemy, our fundamental humanity is a ‘greater common identity’.[[31]](#footnote-31)

Shaw wanted a very clear definition of civilians: “those who do not participate directly in armed conflict and whose non-participation primarily defines their conflict role.”[[32]](#footnote-32) The problem, of course, is that in attempting simplicity, it leaves too many questions. Shaw appears to possibly absolve political leaders from participation in the conflict; are they “directly” involved? Workers in ‘strategic targets’ such as munitions factories, railways, dockyards, communications and utilities centres are likely to continue to be ‘collateral damage’ for as long as their place of employment is thought to be operational. The dilemma is that by dint of being in an occupation central to the smooth running of the country pre-war, in a ‘total war’ scenario they suddenly find themselves in a support service crucial to the war effort, even though they are a civilian electrician, dockworker or fettler.[[33]](#footnote-33)

Murphy tries to explain the morality of ‘The killing of the innocent’ by defining the innocent as anyone who “may not reasonably be regarded as engaged in an attempt to destroy you.” [[34]](#footnote-34) He gives the examples of a conscripted pacifist front-line soldier who shoots above the enemy’s head and an octogenarian civilian who willingly contributes money to the war effort and attends rallies as outlier examples. It is morally just to shoot the soldier, even though it may be argued the octogenarian is a bigger contributor to the war. A more realistic example is that of a farmer, growing food for the army. Murphy suggests that the farmer is a non-combatant because he is helping the soldier as a human being, not because of his role as a soldier, whereas a general, while not shooting a rifle, is a combatant as he aids the soldier in his role of soldier. Following this principle, he allows that workers at munitions factories are combatants, but gives a wholly unsatisfactory solution to the judgment of factories manufacturing both army and civilian products, such as ball bearings or oil refineries. He suggests that the burden of proof lies with the attacker and that a presumption of innocence be allowed until proven otherwise. But there he stops, leaving unjudged the obvious hypothetical situation where half the output of the refinery goes to the army and the other half to civilian service stations.[[35]](#footnote-35)

Primoratz begins his discussion on ‘Civilian immunity in war’[[36]](#footnote-36) with two arguments against civilian immunity from survivors of air raids. Firstly he quotes George Orwell who refused to accept it was worse to kill civilians than soldiers, and who appreciated the aeroplane’s ability to kill a more equitable cross-section of society, rather than only young men.[[37]](#footnote-37) Enzensberger remembers how the eyes of the ‘innocent civilians’ would light up when the Fuhrer spoke and that “without their enthusiastic support the Nazis could have never come to power.” Civilians are thus responsible for what their elected leaders, and the army, do,[[38]](#footnote-38) although this seems particular harsh when applied to civilians of 1933 Germany without the hindsight of twelve years of Nazi government.

Using a consequentialist argument to justify civilian immunity only holds for as long as one cannot argue that good consequences will come from attacking enemy civilian populations, for example, the war will end sooner and so less of ‘our’ soldiers will die. Primoratz uses Warner’s distinction between combatant and non-combatant as one who is “currently engaged in the business of war”[[39]](#footnote-39) although he allows a broad understanding of “currently” to include a soldier asleep or on leave, not only when he is brandishing a weapon. Similarly, politicians, scientists and workers in war industries are combatants where food producers are not. Primoratz goes on to examine whether civilians are mere or responsible bystanders to their government’s actions, but determines that either the country is such that to protest government aggression would be at personal cost or that it is impossible to distinguish between those who supported or opposed the government.[[40]](#footnote-40) Thus, he asserts that even in the face of defeat in a just war, attacking the enemy’s civilian population is immoral. His will allow, however, exemption if the terms of the defeat are worse than the bombing of civilians. A Nazi victory in Europe would have seen not only territory losses, reparations and loss of national pride, but genocide, enslavement and forced dislocation for a number of peoples of Europe. In the face of this “supreme emergency”[[41]](#footnote-41) Walzer and Primoratz accept that it was morally justified “as the only possible response”.[[42]](#footnote-42) Losing a war and political independence does not meet this standard of supreme emergency, however.

Coady argues that civilian immunity should be an ethical absolute. Some moral scenarios are so inherently accepted by society that to act against these is to create “an unbalance and incoherence in moral thought and practice.”[[43]](#footnote-43) Primoratz agrees but argues that, in a sense, the acting against this principle for a short period of time was less morally calamitous than long-term Nazi control of Europe. Coady continues that any exemption to the killing of innocent civilians is likely to give rise to its misuse, but acknowledges that when faced with the imminent extermination of one’s race, and killing of civilians is a last resort, ‘the widespread misuse of the exemption’ argument is unlikely to, nor should, stop any action to prevent the genocide. Primoratz concludes that civilian immunity should be an “almost absolute principle” which trumps other moral considerations apart from a “narrowly understood moral disaster”.[[44]](#footnote-44)

There is no doubt that the Allied bombing of civilian towns was, and remains, controversial. From the safety of 2013, secured in part by the RAF and USAAF in World War II, it is easy to judge the decisions and actions of Bomber Command. A greater understanding of the state of the war, the concept that a ‘total war’ was being fought, the fact of British towns already having been bombed, the ineffective planes and the failure of previous plans gives the reader a greater insight to the last resort thinking that lead to the February 1942 decision to commence strategic or area bombing. While the military effectiveness is questioned, what if the USAAF had have also committed to night bombing raids with the RAF? Would this have had the intended impact on morale and shortened the war?

Despite favourable arguments such as those expoused by Primoratz and Walzer that the victory of Nazism would have been a greater evil than the bombing of civilians, the post-war actions of the Allies suggest that they had significant qualms. Almost as soon as the Germans had capitulated, the planes that had once brought bombs to Berlin now brought food and medicine. Langenbacher suggests that postwar reconstruction of Germany can be “partly explained as an informal way … to make amends.”[[45]](#footnote-45) No Luftwaffe officers were brought before the Nuremberg Trials over bombing of British cities for fear it would raise the spectre of the actions of Bomber Command.[[46]](#footnote-46) Once the war was won, there was a tacit, and in some places more vocal, agreement that the bombing of cities was ‘not cricket, old chap’ to use that most British of phrases to denote unfair play. Lord Salisbury summed up the sentiment, “of course the Germans began it, but we do not take the devil as our example.”[[47]](#footnote-47) This was borne out by Harris not receiving a peerage, an honour awarded to all other British commanders, and no campaign medal for aircrew, again an honour afforded all other units. This controversy continued to 2012 when Bomber Command finally had its own Memorial, albeit raised through private donations and the Ministry of Defence refusing to contribute to the official opening.[[48]](#footnote-48)

In the light of the alternative, Nazi control of Europe and potentially of Britain, the British Government and Allied Command must have felt that they had no alternative but to initiate area bombing in 1942. That they did not reevaluate the practice in the light of changing circumstances in 1944 and especially 1945 as the war was obviously being won, but rather escalated the attacks is the aspect which is particularly damning.

The final, and quite even-handed, analysis is deserved to be given by the modern day RAF: “Bomber Command did not win the war independently – but the war could not have been won without their efforts.”[[49]](#footnote-49)

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1. Winston Churchill, February 1942, in Eric Langenbacher, ‘The allies in World War II: the Anglo-American bombardment of German cities’, in Adam Jones (ed.), *Genocide, war crimes and the West: history and complicity*, London; New York, c2004, p. 121. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. John Keegan, *The Second World War,* Sydney, 1989, p. 418. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *Ibid.*, p. 421. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Where the bombers were far more accurate and efficient than Air Marshall Arthur Harris, chief of RAF Bomber Command, predicted. *Ibid.,* p. 415. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Ibid.*, p. 420. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. *Ibid.* [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Mark Connelly, *Reaching for the Stars: A new history of Bomber Command in World War II*, London, 2001, p. 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. *Ibid.*, p. 162. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Alexander B. Downes, *Targeting Civilians in War*, Ithaca, NY, 2008, pp. 31-35. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Robert G. Moeller, ‘The bombing war in Germany, 2005 – 1940: Back to the Future’, in Yuki Tanaka and Marilyn B. Young, *Bombing Civilians: a twentieth century history*, New York, p. 49. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Keegan, p. 420. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. *Ibid.*, pp. 420-421. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. *Ibid.*, p. 421. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. *Daily Express*, April 25 1940 [sic], in Connelly, p. 69. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. *Daily Mirror*, April 25 1940 [sic], in Connelly, p. 69. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. He obviously did not read the *Express* or the *Mirror*! [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. *The Times*, April 30 1942, in Connelly, p. 70. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Steven J. Zaloga, *Operation Pointblank 1944: Defeating the Luftwaffe,* Oxford, 2011, p. 12. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Keegan, pp. 425-426. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Ronald Schaffer, ‘The bombing campaigns in World War II: The European theater’, in Tanaka and Young, pp. 35-36. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Harris quoted Hosea (8:7) as one justification: “For they have sown the wind and they shall reap the whirlwind.” [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Schaffer, pp. 35-36. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. K.P. Werrell, ‘The strategic bombing of Germany in World War II: costs and accomplishments”, *Journal of American History*, Vol. 73, No. 3, p. 712 in Langenbacher, p. 119. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. United States Strategic Bombing Survey, pp. 95-98, in Langenbacher, p. 119. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. , USSBS in Langenbacher, p. 119. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Langenbacher, endnote 8, p. 128-129; Keegan, p. 432. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Keegan, p. 432. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Moeller, pp. 53-54. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Langenbacher, p. 128. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Moeller, p. 48. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Shaw, p. 119. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. *Ibid.*, p. 122. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. A colleague’s grandfather (a fettler) was prohibited from enlisting in WWII due to his employment in an essential service. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Jeffrie G. Murphy, ‘The killing of the innocent’, *Monist,* Vol. 57, pp. 527-550, in C.A.J. Coady and Igor Primoratz, *Military Ethics*, Farnham, Surrey, UK, 2008, pp. 301-306. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. *Ibid.* [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Igor Primoratz, ‘Civilian immunity in war’, *Philosophical Forum*, vol. 36, pp. 41-58, in Coady & Primoratz, pp. 321-338. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. S. Orwell and I. Angus, eds., *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell*, vol. 3, Secker & Warburg, London, 1968, pp. 151-152, in Primoratz, pp. 322-323. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. H.M. Enzensberger, *Civil War*, trans. P. Spence and M. Chalmers, Granta Books, London, 1994, p. 50 in Primoratz, p. 323. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Michael Warner, *Just and Unjust Wars: A Moral Argument with Historical Illustrations*, New York, 1977, p. 145. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Primoratz, pp. 50-53. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Walzer, p. 253, in Primoratz, p. 54. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Primoratz, p. 55. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. C.A.J. Coady, “Terrorism, just war and supreme emergency,” in T. Coady and M. O’Keefe (eds), *Terrorism and Justice: Moral Argument in a Threatened World*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 2002, p. 19, in Primoratz, p. 56. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Primoratz, pp. 56-57. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Langenbacher, p. 117. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Moeller, p. 54. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Keegan, p. 433. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. It is indicative, however, of the Palace’s feelings that the memorial was opened by Queen Elizabeth II and attended by eleven other royals. Eleanor Harding, ‘’It’s Disgusting’: Anger as MoD lands veterans with £700,000 bill to unveil Bomber Command Memorial’, *Mail Online*, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2163012/MoD-lands-veterans-700-000-ceremony-unveil-Bomber-Command-Memorial.html>, accessed 15 January 2013. There were also protests at the unveiling (by the Queen Mother) of a memorial to ‘Bomber’ Harris in 1992, ‘Statue: Bomber Harris’, London Remembers, <http://www.londonremembers.com/memorials/bomber-harris>, accessed 15 January 2013. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. Royal Air Force Benevolent Fund, ‘Bomber Command Memorial: About Bomber Command’, <http://rafbf.org/1795/about-bomber-command.html>, accessed 15 January, 2013. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)